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QUEEN ESTHER,  
OR THE FEAST OF LOTS. ESTHER 4: 13, 14.

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The story of Queen Esther is celebrated every year by the Jews at the feast of lots or Purim. It is the Hebrew Christmas, and is a time of mirth and jollity. The book of Esther is read over in a dramatic style in the synagogue, and the names of Haman and of his sons are cursed, while those of Esther and of Mordecai are blessed. The people have their annual holidays and every house and every heart is full of gladness.

The persons spoken of in the book lived in a remote age of the world and in a distant land. We only see them dimly through the mists of long forgotten centuries. Yet the story is most interesting and most romantic. Our eyes are ever being directed eastwards to those central lands of the world. A war in Egypt, a visit of the Shah of Persia, the successor of Ahasuerus on the throne, or some other event ever reminds us that we are still linked to the days that are gone, and that God's purposes in these eastern lands are not yet carried out to completion.

In the history of Joseph we have a man guided by Providence through many trials, and raised into places of power and honor that he might be the means of keeping the chosen people alive in a great famine. In the history of Esther we have another illustration of God's care over his people and his overruling all things for their good.

But this time it is not the slow and silent process of death by starvation from which he saves them. It is a deliverance from the dagger of the assassin and the hangman's rope.

The scene of the story is the wonderful land of Persia and in Shushan, a royal residence of the Emperor Xerxes. Xerxes like the great men of the East had many wives and like them too, his home was full of discord. He quarreled with his favorite wife Vashti and divorced her. A large

number of the fairest women in the land were brought before him from whom he was to choose her successor. His choice fell on Hadassah, a very beautiful woman, as her name would lead us to infer. She was an orphan who lived in the house of her uncle and was unto him as a daughter. She was a Jewess although she said nothing to the king about her origin, for Mordecai had told her to be silent. She was taken into the king's palace and occupied the position of his favorite wife, while Mordecai was frequently to be seen near the court of the women, eagerly watching for any news of the safety and welfare of his favorite child. While in the king's gate he was able to overhear a conspiracy for the murder of Xerxes and to warn the king of his danger. But Xerxes was too great a man to take any notice of a poor Jew, and so Mordecai's deed was forgotten. There was one however who noticed Mordecai as he passed in and out on the king's business. This was Haman an Agagite or Amalekite, also from the land of Israel, but no lover of the Jewish race. He was a great minister of Xerxes and accustomed to the most humble obeisance from the servants of the king. But this stern Jew paid him no obeisance. He would not bow the knee to a descendant of the race whom God had given over to the sword. Haman observed this and no doubt divined the reason. It made him exceedingly wroth.

He had been a most successful man and a great favorite with his master. He had whatever his heart could wish, and yet he was not satisfied so long as he could not get that Jew at the king's gate to do him honor. He might have compelled obedience but he did not choose to do that. He laid a plan for the destruction of the whole Jewish people in the vast empire of Ahasuerus. Nothing short of a universal massacre of the tens of thousands of innocent men and women and children who were scattered through the emperor's dominions would satisfy him. The whole race of Amalek his own forefather had once been given over to destruction for the sake of the Jews, but now it will be the destruction of all the Jews to please a son of Amalek. He hated the whole race most bitterly and he was ready to pay a large sum of money for his revenge. He agreed to give Xerxes £2,000,000

sterling for the decree he wished him to grant. The king seemed to be pleased with the price and signed the decree. The posts carried it throughout the length and breadth of the Persian Empire, and it was published everywhere. The decree commanded the people to destroy, to kill and to cause to perish, all Jews both young and old, little children and women in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey.

Haman considered that the victory was won. The decree had gone forth signed with the king's seal and it could not be altered. The day of the massacre was named. The orders were quite explicit. There was to be no mercy shown. They were commanded to destroy, to kill and to cause to perish. The property of the Jews was to be given their murderers for spoil. The Jews have always been known for their riches, and the right to plunder them would be a powerful bribe to a needy populace. Haman was satisfied. He had nothing more to do, and so he sat down to eat and to drink and to make merry with the king.

But while he and the king were making merry the Jews were in perplexity. Mordecai sent word to Esther to go and remonstrate with the king. But the answer came back that she was not in the meantime in the king's favor, and that to go in to him without an invitation was to run the risk of her life. Matters had now come to such a crisis that it was no longer safe to wait. And so Mordecai gave her reasons why she should make the attempt. If she held her peace she would certainly die in the general massacre of the Jews on the thirteenth of Adar, and it was as well to die now as to die then. But while it was certain that she would die if she held her peace, there was a possibility that the king might stretch forth the golden sceptre and so save her life. And lastly it was possible that she was chosen as an instrument in God's hands to keep her people alive now as Joseph had been God's instrument in days of old.

The reasoning of Mordecai seemed sound to Esther. She fasted and prayed in her house in the midst of her servants, and she asked the Jews in the city to fast and pray with her.

At the end of three days she would take Moordecai's advice and go in unbidden to the king ready to live or to die.

The third day came and Queen Esther went in to the king and found favor in his sight. He stretched out the golden sceptre and she was saved. She invited him to a banquet on the morrow and asked Haman also as a guest. Hamen went to the banquet and returned home to his wife in the very best of spirits. He told his wife that he had everything his heart could wish, yet he added, It availeth me nothing so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting in the king's gate. His wife and her friends advised him to get a gallows fifty cubits high to be made in the night and to get the king to allow Mordecai to be hanged on it in the morning.

The gallows is made and Haman goes joyfully to Queen Esther's banquet. But a power which the wicked Haman knows not of, has been at work in the king's heart. While the carpenters at Haman's house are hammering together the planks of that lofty gallows, the sounds they make will not allow the king to sleep. He tosses to and fro and wearies for the morning light, and to while away the hours of darkness he causes the records of his reign to be read before him. Among other things the story of the conspiracy to take his life and the discovery of it by Mordecai is read. The king asked what honor and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this? His servants tell him that Mordecai hath had nothing done for him. The king resolves that something shall be done, but what it shall be he leaves to the prime minister. Now it happens that Haman has come early to see the king and to ask for permission that Mordecai may be hanged. He is at that moment in the outer court, and the fact being announced to the king he is called in before him.

The king asks the question, What shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor? and Haman considering that he himself is that person says, Let royal apparel be brought which the king useth to wear, and the horse that the king rideth upon, and on the head of which a crown of gold is set, and let the apparel and the horse be delivered into the hands of one of the king's most noble princes, that they may array the man withal whom the king delighteth to honor,

and cause him to ride on horseback through the streets of the city and proclaim before him, Thus shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honor. Then the king said to Haman, Make haste, and take the apparel and the horse as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew that setteth at the king's gate.

We can imagine the shudder that must have made Haman's blood run cold as he heard the king pronounce the hated name of Mordecai. But he had to smother his disgust and obey the king's orders. He had to lead the horse on which Mordecai was seated and proclaim before him, Thus shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honor. As soon as the bitter trial is over he hurries home to his wife and tells her what has befallen him. He receives cold comfort from her. If Mordecai, she says, before whom thou hast begun to fall be of the seed of the Jews thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt fall before him. And calamity follows calamity. He is hurried off to the Queen's banquet, but it is only to be denounced as a traitor and to be hung on the very scaffold he prepared for Mordecai.

Haman the enemy of the Jews is dead. Yet this is not enough. His decree to massacre the Jews still lives. It has become a law of the Medes and the Persians and cannot be altered. How then is the massacre to be averted?

Mordecai had a plan ready for the emergency. It was very simple. As the king could not cancel his former decree Mordecai got him to promulgate another decree and make it equally public with the first. The decree simply asked the Jews to arm themselves and to make themselves ready for their own defence against the 13th day of Adar. And so admirably did the decree work that when the day came their enemies found them ready and armed. They were not as had been foolishly imagined a flock of sheep to be butchered without resistance and without danger. They were a band of heroes, every one ready to die if die he must, but determined to sell his life dear. Therefore instead of being exterminated, they not only held their own but came off victorious. They prevailed against their enemies. Their bravery made them to be esteemed by the princes and by the people. Mor-

decai became a favorite in the King's Court and peace and prosperity fell upon the Jewish race for many a day. So the Jews, in memory of this deliverance of their people, second only to their deliverance from Egypt, instituted the feast of Purim, the feast of lots. There is a touch of humor in the very name. Haman cast lots for a favorable day on which to massacre the Jews, but as it turned out he was casting lots for his own destruction. The honors he recommended to the king, in the belief they were to be conferred upon himself, were conferred on his own advice and by his own hand on the man he despised above all others. The day plotted for the extermination of the Jews became the day of their greatest prosperity. Every thing that this wicked son of Amalek planned for evil against God's chosen race was overruled by Him for good, and the very wrath of their enemies brought down a blessing upon them, and became for them the means of high honor and lasting prosperity.